

# Pizzagate conspiracy theory



“Pizzagate” connected Comet Ping Pong (pictured) to a non-existent child-sex ring.

**Pizzagate** is a debunked<sup>[1][2]</sup> conspiracy theory that emerged during the 2016 United States presidential election cycle alleging that John Podesta's emails, which were leaked by WikiLeaks, contain coded messages referring to human trafficking and connecting a number of restaurants in the United States and members of the Democratic Party with a child-sex ring. It has been discredited by a wide array of sources across the political spectrum, described as a “fictitious conspiracy theory” by the District of Columbia Police Department and determined to be false by multiple organizations including Snopes.com, *The New York Times*, and Fox News.

## 1 Origins

This conspiracy theory emerged near the end of the 2016 United States presidential election cycle, with *BuzzFeed News* tracing its origin to a tweet written by a “reputed white supremacist” on October 30, 2016. The tweet claimed that the New York City Police Department, which was combing through emails found on Anthony Weiner's laptop as part of a reopened investigation into his sexting scandals, discovered the existence of a pedophilia ring linked to members of the Democratic Party.<sup>[3][4]</sup> Internet users reading John Podesta's emails released by Wikileaks in early November 2016 speculated that some words in Podesta's emails were code words for pedophilia and human trafficking.<sup>[1][5]</sup> The theory also proposed that the ring was a meeting ground for satanic ritual abuse.<sup>[6]</sup> Other claims that the theory proposed include the use of handkerchief codes (interpreted from a widely-cited email with a “Pizza-related”

handkerchief), the alleged use of pedophile symbols in the logos of various organizations, and John Podesta and his brother Tony Podesta's alleged connection to the disappearance of Madeleine McCann.<sup>[1]</sup>

The theory was then posted on the message board Godlike Productions. The following day, Sean Adl-Tabatabai (a former associate of professional conspiracy theorist David Icke) repeated the story on YourNewsWire, citing a 4chan post from earlier that year.<sup>[4]</sup> Adl-Tabatabai's story was then spread by and elaborated on by other fake news websites, including SubjectPolitics, which falsely claimed the New York Police Department had raided Hillary Clinton's property.<sup>[3]</sup> The website *Conservative Daily Post* ran a headline falsely stating that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had “confirmed” this story.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 1.1 Spread on social media

Around this time, Twitter and 4chan users started searching the leaked emails of John Podesta for food-related “code words” that supposedly revealed the existence of a sex trafficking operation.<sup>[3]</sup> For example, *The New York Times* reported that the phrase “cheese pizza” was thought by a poster to 4chan to be a code word for child pornography since they had the same initials.<sup>[1]</sup> The allegations spread to “the mainstream internet” following a post on the website Reddit several days before the 2016 United States presidential election.<sup>[8]</sup> The post, meanwhile removed by the site, alleged the involvement of the Washington, D.C., business Comet Ping Pong:

Everyone associated with the business is making semi-overt, semi-tongue-in-cheek, and semi-sarcastic inferences towards sex with minors. The artists that work for and with the business also generate nothing but cultish imagery of disembodiment, blood, beheadings, sex, and of course pizza.<sup>[2]</sup>

The story was picked up by fake news<sup>[9]</sup> websites such as *Infowars.com*,<sup>[lower-alpha 1]</sup> *Planet Free Will*<sup>[13]</sup> and *the Vigilant Citizen*,<sup>[14][15]</sup> and has been promoted by alt-right activists such as Mike Cernovich and Brittany Pettibone.<sup>[8]</sup> Jonathan Albright, an assistant professor of media analytics at Elon University, has said that a disproportionate number of tweets about Pizzagate came from the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Vietnam and that some of the most frequent retweeters were bots.<sup>[16]</sup>

Redditors from the subreddit */r/The Donald* created the */r/pizzagate* subreddit to further develop the conspiracy theory.<sup>[13]</sup> This subreddit was banned on November 23, 2016, for violating Reddit's policy against "the proliferation of personal and confidential information", with Reddit saying to viewers who attempted to access the banned subreddit that "We don't want witchhunts on our site".<sup>[8]</sup> Users had posted personal details of people connected to the alleged conspiracy.<sup>[17]</sup>

After the ban on Reddit, the discussion was moved to the *v/pizzagate* sub on *Voat*, a website similar to *Reddit*, where discussion continues.<sup>[18]</sup>

## 1.2 Turkish press reports

In Turkey, the allegations were reported by pro-government newspapers (i.e., those supportive of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), such as *Sabah*, *A Haber*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Akşam* and *Star*. The story appeared on Turkey's *Ekşi Sözlük* (a Reddit-like site) and on the viral news network *HaberSelf*, where anyone can post content. These forums reposted images and allegations directly from the since-deleted subreddit, which were reprinted in full on the state-controlled press. A columnist in the *The Daily Dot* suggested government sources were pushing this story, after a recent child sexual abuse scandal, in order to distract attention from controversial pending legislation on child marriage.<sup>[19]</sup>

## 2 Harassment and violence



The pizzeria, *Comet Ping Pong*, was threatened by hundreds of people who believed in the *Pizzagate* conspiracy theory.<sup>[20]</sup>

As *Pizzagate* spread, *Comet Ping Pong* "received hundreds of threatening messages and phone calls from people who believed the story to be true".<sup>[20]</sup> The restaurant's owner, James Alefantis, told *The New York Times*: "From this insane, fabricated conspiracy theory, we've come under constant assault. I've done nothing for days but try to clean this up and protect my staff and friends from being terrorized."<sup>[13]</sup>

Some adherents identified the *Instagram* account of Alefantis, and used some of the posted photos to "prove"

their conspiracy. Many of the images shown were friends and family who had liked *Comet Ping Pong's* page on Facebook. In some cases, imagery was taken from random unrelated websites and claimed to be Alefantis' own.<sup>[2]</sup> The restaurant's owners and staff were harassed, threatened on social media websites, and the owner received death threats.<sup>[13]</sup> The restaurant's *Yelp* page was locked by the operators of the site citing reviews that were "motivated more by the news coverage itself than the reviewer's personal consumer experience".<sup>[2]</sup>

Several bands who had performed at the pizzeria also faced harassment. For example, Amanda Kleinman of *Heavy Breathing* deleted her Twitter account after receiving negative comments connecting her and her band to the conspiracy theory.<sup>[13]</sup> Another band, *Sex Stains*, had closed the comments of their *YouTube* videos and addressed the controversy in the description of their videos.<sup>[21]</sup> The artist Arrington de Dionysio, whose murals are frequently displayed at the pizzeria, described the campaign of harassment against him in detail,<sup>[22]</sup> and averred of the attacks in general that "I think it's a very deliberate assault, which will eventually be a coordinated assault on all forms of free expression." The affair has drawn comparisons with the *Gamergate controversy*.<sup>[23][24]</sup>



*Politics and Prose* was among some of the D.C. businesses that were also harassed due to the *Pizzagate* conspiracy theory.<sup>[25]</sup>

*Pizzagate*-related harassment of businesses extended beyond *Comet Ping Pong* to include other nearby D.C. businesses, such as *Besta Pizza* three doors down from *Comet*; *Little Red Fox*; the popular bookstore *Politics and Prose*; and the French bistro *Terasol*.<sup>[25][26]</sup> The businesses received a high volume of threatening and menacing telephone calls (some of which included death threats) and also experienced online harassment.<sup>[26]</sup> The co-owners of *Little Red Fox* and *Terasol* filed police reports.<sup>[26]</sup>

*Brooklyn* restaurant *Roberta's* was also pulled into the hoax, receiving harassing phone calls, including a call from an unidentified person telling an employee that she was "going to bleed and be tortured".<sup>[18][27]</sup> The restaurant became involved after a since-removed *YouTube* video used images from their social media accounts to imply they were a part of the hoax sex ring. Others

then spread the accusations on social media, claiming the "Clinton family loves Roberta's".<sup>[28]</sup>

East Side Pies, in Austin, Texas saw one of its delivery trucks vandalized with an epithet, and was the target of online harassment related to their supposed involvement in Pizzagate, theorized connections to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Illuminati.<sup>[29][30]</sup>

## 2.1 Comet Ping Pong shooting

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AO 91 (Rev. 08/09) Criminal Complaint

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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
for the  
District of Columbia

United States of America )  
v. ) Case No.  
Edgar Maddison Welch )  
)  
Defendant(s)

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**CRIMINAL COMPLAINT**

I, the complainant in this case, state that the following is true to the best of my knowledge and belief:  
On or about the date(s) of December 4, 2016 in the county of Washington in the  
District of Columbia, the defendant(s) violated:

<p>Code Section 18 U.S.C. § 924(b)</p>	<p>Offense Description Interstate Transportation of a Firearm With Intent to Commit an Offense Or With Knowledge or Reasonable Cause to Believe That an Offense Would Be Committed</p>
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This criminal complaint is based on these facts:  
Please see the attached affidavit.

☒ Continued on the attached sheet.

Sworn to before me and signed in my presence.

Date: 12/12/2016

City and state: Washington, D.C.

Complainant's signature  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Special Agent Justin Holgate  
Printed name and title

Judge's signature  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Magistrate Judge G. Michael Harvey  
Printed name and title

### US v Welch Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint (full text)

On December 4, 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch, a 28-year-old Salisbury, North Carolina man, allegedly fired three shots in the restaurant with an AR-15-style rifle, striking walls, a desk, and a door.<sup>[31][32]</sup> Welch later told police that he had planned to "self-investigate" the conspiracy theory.<sup>[33]</sup> He surrendered after he "found no evidence that underage children were being harbored in the restaurant", was arrested without incident and charged with assault with a dangerous weapon.<sup>[34]</sup> No one was injured.<sup>[35]</sup>

Welch told police he had "read online that the Comet restaurant was harboring child sex slaves and that he wanted to see for himself if they were there".<sup>[18]</sup> In an interview with *The New York Times*, Welch said that he regretted how he handled the situation but did not dismiss the conspiracy theory, and rejected the description of it as "fake news".<sup>[36][37][38]</sup> Some conspiracy theorists believed that the shooting was a staged attempt to discredit their investigations.<sup>[39]</sup>

On December 13, 2016, Welch was charged with one

count of "interstate transportation of a firearm with intent to commit an offense", a federal crime.<sup>[40]</sup> According to court documents, Welch attempted to recruit friends three days before the attack by urging them to watch a YouTube video about the conspiracy.<sup>[41]</sup> He was subsequently charged with two additional offenses, with the grand jury returning an indictment charging Welch with assault with a dangerous weapon and possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, each charge carrying a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.<sup>[42][43]</sup> Welch has pleaded not guilty to all of these charges.<sup>[44]</sup>

## 3 Debunking

The conspiracy theory has been widely discredited and debunked. It has been described as false by the fact-checking website *snopes.com* and *The New York Times*.<sup>[35][45][46]</sup> Other criticisms of the conspiracy theory came from *The Observer*,<sup>[47]</sup> *The Washington Post*,<sup>[48]</sup> *The Independent*,<sup>[49]</sup> *The Huffington Post*,<sup>[50]</sup> *The Washington Times*,<sup>[10]</sup> *The LA Times*,<sup>[51]</sup> *Fox News*,<sup>[52]</sup> and *The Miami Herald*.<sup>[53]</sup> The Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia characterized the matter as "fictitious".<sup>[53]</sup>

Much of the purported evidence cited by the conspiracy theory's proponents had been taken from entirely different sources and made to appear as if they supported the conspiracy.<sup>[2]</sup> Images of children of family and friends of the pizzeria's staff were taken from social media sites such as Instagram and claimed to be photos of victims.<sup>[45]</sup> *The Charlotte Observer* noted the diverse group of sources that had debunked the conspiracy theory, pointing out this included the Fox News Channel in addition to *The New York Times*.<sup>[31]</sup>

On December 10, 2016, *The New York Times* published an article that analyzed the claims that the theory proposed.<sup>[1]</sup> They emphasized that:

- The theory claimed "cheese pizza" was code for "child pornography," since the term had been used in this context previously on the website 4Chan. This was extrapolated to other mentions of food in non-political emails. However, as the *Times* pointed out, the "Podesta brothers were famous in Washington circles for their Italian cooking and big salon and fund-raising dinners, often cooked by their mother."
- Theorists linked the conspiracy to Comet Ping Pong, through similarities between company logos and symbols related to Satanism and pedophilia. However, *The Times* noted that striking similarities may also be found in the logos of a number of unrelated companies, such as AOL, Time Warner, and MSN.
- A photograph was circulated purporting to show President Barack Obama playing ping pong with a



child inside Comet Ping Pong. However, the picture actually hangs framed in the **White House**, where it was also originally taken.

- Theorists claimed an underground network beneath Comet Ping Pong; however, the restaurant in-fact has no basement, and the picture used to support this claim was taken from another facility.
- Theorists claimed to have a picture of restaurant owner Alefantis wearing a t-shirt endorsing pedophilia. However, the image was of another person entirely, and the shirt, which read “I [heart symbol] L’Enfant,” was actually a reference to the L’Enfant Cafe-Bar in DC, whose owner was pictured in the image, and which itself was named after **Pierre Charles L’Enfant**, designer of much of the layout of Washington, DC.
- Theorists claimed John and Tony Podesta kidnapped **Madeleine McCann** using police sketches which were, in fact, two sketches of the same suspect taken from the descriptions of two eye witnesses. Furthermore, the claim that the brothers were in **Portugal** at the time of the kidnapping was sourced only to *Victurus Libertas*, notable for, among other things, suggesting that the queen of England is a reptilian alien.

No alleged victims have come forward, nor has any physical evidence been found.<sup>[54]</sup>

## 4 Responses



messages in front of Comet Ping Pong following the shooting

In an interview with **NPR** on November 27, 2016, Comet Ping Pong owner James Alefantis referred to the conspiracy theory as “an insanely complicated, made-up, fictional lie-based story” and a “coordinated political attack.”<sup>[55]</sup> *The Seattle Times* wrote that the conspiracy theorists’ assertions were “dangerous and damaging false allegations” and that they were “repeatedly debunked, disproved and dismissed.”<sup>[56]</sup> Despite the conspiracy theory being debunked, it continued to spread on social media, with over one million messages using hashtag #Pizzagate on Twitter in November 2016.<sup>[31]</sup> Stefanie

MacWilliams, contributor for *Planet Free Will* who wrote an article about Pizzagate, was reported in the *Toronto Star* as saying, after the Comet Ping Pong shooting, that “I really have no regrets and it’s honestly really grown our audience.” Pizzagate, she said, is “two worlds clashing. People don’t trust the mainstream media anymore, but it’s true that people shouldn’t take the alternative media as truth, either.”<sup>[57]</sup>

After the Comet Ping Pong shooting, **Alex Jones** backed off from the idea that the D.C. pizzeria was the center of the conspiracy.<sup>[39]</sup> On December 4, *Infowars.com* uploaded a **YouTube** video that linked Pizzagate to the November 13 death of a sex-worker-rights activist. The video falsely claimed that she had been investigating a link between the **Clinton Foundation** and **human trafficking** in Haiti and it speculated that she had been murdered in connection with her investigation. According to the activist’s former employer, her family and her friends, her death was in fact a suicide and she was not investigating the Clinton Foundation.<sup>[58]</sup> By December 14, Infowars had removed two out of three of its videos related to Pizzagate.<sup>[59]</sup>

On December 8, **Hillary Clinton** responded to the conspiracy theory, speaking about the dangers of fake news websites. She said, “The epidemic of malicious fake news and fake propaganda that flooded social media over the past year, it’s now clear that so-called fake news can have real-world consequences.”<sup>[60]</sup>

### 4.1 Public opinion

A poll conducted by **Public Policy Polling** on December 6–7, 2016, asked 1,224 U.S. registered voters if they thought Hillary Clinton was “connected to a child sex ring being run out of a pizzeria in Washington DC?” The poll showed that 9% said that did believe she was connected, 72% said they did not, and 19% were not sure.<sup>[61][62]</sup> The full results, organized according to which candidate the respondents supported in the 2016 presidential election, were as follows:

A poll of voters conducted on December 17–20 by *The Economist* **YouGov** asked voters if they believed that, “Leaked e-mails from the Clinton campaign talked about pedophilia and human trafficking - ‘Pizzagate’.” The results showed that 17% of Clinton voters responded “true” while 82% responded “not true”; and 46% of Trump voters responded “true” while 53% responded “not true.”<sup>[63]</sup>

### 4.2 Flynn Jr. dismissal

After the shooting incident at Comet Ping Pong, Michael Flynn Jr., a member of **President-Elect Donald Trump**’s transition team and the son of **Michael T. Flynn**, Trump’s designate for **National Security Advisor**, tweeted:

Until #Pizzagate proven to be false, it’ll



The son of Michael T. Flynn (pictured) was forced out of Donald Trump's transition team for tweeting something related to Pizzagate.<sup>[64]</sup>

remain a story. The left seems to forget #PodestaEmails and the many 'coincidences' tied to it.<sup>[65][66][67]</sup>

On December 6, 2016, Flynn Jr. was forced out of Trump's transition team.<sup>[68]</sup> Spokesman Jason Miller did not identify the reason for Flynn Jr.'s dismissal; however, *The New York Times* reported that other officials had confirmed it was related to the tweet.<sup>[64]</sup>

Flynn Jr.'s father had previously posted similarly conspiratorial material regarding Hillary Clinton alleging that Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta, drank the blood and bodily fluids of other humans in Satanic rituals, which *Politico* says "soon morphed into the '#pizzagate' conspiracy theory involving Comet Ping Pong."<sup>[69]</sup> On November 2, 2016, Flynn tweeted a link to a story with unfounded accusations and wrote, "U decide - NYPD Blows Whistle on New Hillary Emails: Money Laundering, Sex Crimes w Children, etc...MUST READ!" The tweet was shared by over 9,000 people, but was deleted from Flynn's account some time between December 12–13, 2016.<sup>[59]</sup>

## 5 See also

## 6 References

### Informational notes

- [1] On December 9 Alex Jones defended Infowars against the characterization of it as fake news, saying, according to *The Washington Times*: "In an effort to try and censor the liberty movement and free speech, the mainstream media is now attempting to label legitimate news sources like Infowars as 'fake news' to push towards a government-led shut down of Infowars.com."<sup>[10]</sup> Others have disagreed, for example US News, which labeled InfoWars a fake news website to avoid "at all cost".<sup>[11][12]</sup>

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## 7 External links

- Media related to **Pizzagate** at Wikimedia Commons

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